



The KOSOVO Conflict



Consequences



for the Environment



& Human Settlements



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UNEP/UNCHS (Habitat) Balkans Task Force

Foreword

The twentieth session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1999 was an important landmark in the development and policy focus of the organisation. The meeting strongly endorsed the re-orientation of the corporate objectives of UNEP and focused UNEP activities into five core areas of concentration.

Central to this new rationalised policy focus is the commitment by UNEP to enhance and strengthen its capability in the fields of information, monitoring, assessment and early warning. This crucial decision is at the heart of UNEP's role within the United Nations family as the catalytic organisation for the environment. It positions the organisation to be able to respond and be available for effective and objective neutral scientific assessments in such areas as natural disasters and man-made environmental problems.

In keeping with this Governing Council decision and at the strong recommendation of the United Nations Inter-agency Humanitarian Needs Assessment Mission, which visited the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under the leadership of UN Under-Secretary-General, Sergio Vierra de Mello, the Joint UNEP/UNCHS (Habitat) Balkans Task Force (BTF) came into being. It was charged with the task of urgently carrying out a detailed assessment of the environmental and human settlements impact of the conflict.

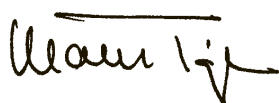
BTF was a joint initiative between UNEP and UNCHS (Habitat) and in line with the mandate of UNCHS to focus on normative functions, the task force integrated a human settlements component working alongside the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

Pekka Haavisto, the former Finnish Environment and Development Cooperation Minister, agreed to serve as BTF chairman. He quickly set about pulling together an international group of experts to work in conjunction with the Nairobi headquartered in-house UNEP and UNCHS teams. I should like to thank Pekka Haavisto for his personal commitment and hard work in carrying out this role.

Throughout the BTF process some sixty experts have been involved in the assessment missions. They were drawn from a wide range of different backgrounds and experience and included input from six UN agencies and departments, 19 countries and 26 NGOs and scientific institutions.

One of the central requirements of the BTF project was that its activities should not divert resources from existing UNEP and UNCHS programmes in other parts of the world. To this end, I am pleased to be able to report that the entire BTF operation has been funded from additional voluntary contributions ensuring no dilution of activities to existing priorities and commitments. My thanks go to those donors who contributed finance and support in kind.

The results and recommendations of the BTF make interesting reading. They highlight the linkage between environmental pollution and humanitarian assistance. This report also demonstrates the need for environmental and human settlement planning in conflict management. I am convinced that such a neutral, objective and scientific assessment of the real situation on the ground in a post-conflict situation is essential. This approach provides a much-needed and reliable source of information to the peoples affected. It also provides a management tool for the international community as an integrated part of the needs assessment requirements in the overall emergency humanitarian effort in war-torn areas.



Klaus Töpfer
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme
Acting Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements



2 Introduction

Perhaps the most endangered natural resource in times of war is truth. This became very evident during the Kosovo Conflict. When the Rambouillet accord failed and NATO air strikes started on 24 March 1999, alarming reports began to appear about the environmental damage caused by the bombing. Images of Pančevo and Novi Sad oil refineries on fire, toxic chemicals leaking into the River Danube, and bomb craters in protected areas were competing with those of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing their homes in Kosovo.

Whilst the immediate humanitarian consequences of the conflict were clear, public opinion was more divided over the possible consequences for the environment. On one hand, there was fear of widespread ecological damage and destruction in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and neighbouring countries. On the other hand, NATO argued that its use of sophisticated weapons against carefully selected targets would minimise environmental and other ‘collateral’ damage. This was the dilemma the Joint UNEP/UNCHS (Habitat) Balkans Task Force (BTF) faced from its establishment in early May 1999.

The Kosovo Conflict also had wider regional impacts: Albania and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had to receive huge numbers of refugees from Kosovo although they were unprepared for the scale of the influx. Other neighbouring countries, especially Bulgaria and Romania, downstream along the Danube, feared the effects of transboundary pollution from targeted industrial facilities. The fires in the oil refineries and oil storage depots sometimes lasted for many days and created clouds of pollution over wide areas, whilst news of the leakage of dangerous chemicals to air, land and water were prominent in the international media.

In Kosovo, Serbian forces systematically emptied and destroyed many towns and villages. The damage to living quarters, infrastructure, clean drinking water supply and waste systems was obvious. When the Kosovan Albanians fled their homes, much of the documentation setting out legal ownership of land and property was lost or taken by force, in turn complicating the return of the refugees to their home areas.

Although addressed largely by other UN bodies, environmental problems caused by the stream of refugees also became an issue, with sanitation and drinking water services under enormous pressure in the overcrowded refugee camps.



Source: Atlas de Poche, Philippe Rekacewicz, Editions du Livre de Poche, Paris, 1996.

International scientific teams were formed

After studying carefully all the incoming news and information about the possible consequences of the conflict for the environment and human settlements, the BTF decided to concentrate on five areas, as follows:

- 1) Environmental consequences of air strikes on industrial sites – field mission
- 2) Environmental consequences of the conflict on the Danube river – complementary field mission
- 3) Consequences of the conflict on biodiversity in protected areas – field mission
- 4) Consequences of the conflict for human settlements and the environment in Kosovo – field assessment and project development/implementation
- 5) Possible use of depleted uranium weapons in Kosovo – desk assessment

MAP (2) Federal Republic of Yugoslavia



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